

# 'OUTSIDE the BUBBLE'

## Ann Compton Reflects on Favorite Moments, New Power Centers

Ann Compton is fiercely protective of her impartiality.

She does not portray her personal feelings for a political party, candidate or American president. And she's come to know seven presidents (and their families) throughout her 40-year career as a White House press corps broadcast journalist.

The drive to remain absolutely neutral has been critical to her integrity.

Compton retired from ABC News in 2014 and is now able to observe the political theater from the sidelines. But in addressing organizations around the country, she still does not let on about her personal feelings.

Compton will be the featured speaker at the Indiana Chamber of Commerce's 2017 Legislative Dinner on March 14 in downtown Indianapolis.

"In all the speaking I do, I am meticulously careful. I never take sides on political parties or the political spectrum. That's my identity and credibility," she stresses.

In her most recent role as a fellow with the Institute of Politics at Harvard University (which ended in late 2016), Compton saw the tumultuous election season play out through the eyes of first-time voters.

"I've stressed to them that this is unconventional; this is not the way this usually works," she says of the 2016 election.

Even to those students, she doesn't let on about her own opinions.

"I continue that as I deal with the students here, to maintain that objectivity. That said, this is the most unconventional political election year that I have ever covered," she asserts.

"This election was not only unconventional in the way it unfolded, but the way it ended. It was breathtaking and I think particularly powerful, because it's probably the reverse of what 90% of the American people thought – not what they wanted possibly, but what they thought – would happen.

"And I didn't think I'd see another election in my lifetime where the winner of the popular election did not win the presidency."

Compton is referring to the last time that scenario played out, in 2000, when Republican George W. Bush won the electoral college, yet lost the popular vote to Democrat Al Gore.

"All of a sudden, the DNC (Democratic National Committee) chairman, Terry McAuliffe, comes running out and saying '(Gore's) not going to concede; it's too close.' The networks – NBC had called Florida for Gore and then pulled it back. That may have been the most dramatic conclusion of an election. It was the 12th of December before we finally had a decision," she reflects.

What was strikingly different in 2016 was the way candidates could reach past the media, directly to their audiences through the use of social and digital media. That leads, however, to a proliferation of non-mainstream news sources and also a lack of depth in reporting.

"The American people, I think, have found it harder and harder to find the kind of deep context and reporting that will provide them with the information they really need to make decisions on the choice of candidates and presidential victor," Compton explains.

She offers that the forecasts, polling and media predictions were wrong because they all saw what they wanted to see and missed the actual story. It's an easy trap to fall into, Compton notes, and she had to remind herself of it in her own reporting at times.

"Don't look at a story and see what you think you want to see. Don't go in with a preconceived idea and look for the information that validates that. Keep your eyes open for what is unexpected. Many reporters covering the story saw what they wanted to see," she stresses.



Ann Compton, pictured here in 1985, covered seven presidents, 10 presidential candidates, and major national and world events as a White House press correspondent for ABC News.

## Overcoming inexperience

ABC News brought Compton back over the summer to help cover the national party conventions. Her prolific career and institutional memory allowed her to reconnect with and interview longtime political heavyweights on the convention floor, including Jesse Jackson, Michael Dukakis and Walter Mondale.

Compton was assigned to the ranks of the White House press corps in 1974; she was the first female broadcast journalist (there were some female print journalists at the time) and one of the youngest.

“Being the first woman had a benefit. I went from office to office to introduce myself and I was instantly recognizable and I stood out. The high visibility was a great benefit. I was the beneficiary of good marketing and I was lucky in that way,” she recalls.

It was her age that presented more of a challenge. She had to overcome a lack of experience while covering one of the toughest journalism beats in the country.

“When I walked out of the White House driveway on the very day that marked 41 years (with ABC News) September 10 (2014), I was now the wise man, the old grey beard. I had an institutional memory of how things work at the White House and how presidents get into the predicaments they can (get into). I think I shared that as often and as fully as I could with my colleagues.

“I walked out as confident as I have ever been in the strength, wisdom and training of the young reporters picking up where I was walking when I was 26 years old.”

## Moments of ‘crisis or celebration’

In covering seven presidential administrations and 10 presidential candidates, Compton’s award-winning work (she’s earned an Emmy and a Peabody, among other accolades), includes reporting on major national and world events.

There were moments of “crisis or celebration”, she says, including the terrorist attacks on September, 11, 2001, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Camp David Accords, and breaking news on various policy and economic matters, to name a few.

Notably, Compton was the only broadcast journalist aboard Air Force One with former President Bush as he was trying to make his way back to Washington D.C. in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. (She plans to discuss that story in Indianapolis during the Chamber’s Legislative Dinner.)

Compton points to another day, however, as one that radically changed the world: Christmas Day, 1990. After her family opened their Christmas presents – Compton and her husband have four children – she reported the fall of the Soviet Union from the White House lawn.

“That was the day that changed every map in every classroom in every school in every corner of the world. To be able to give up my Christmas Day with my children, I say to my children, ‘You’ll always remember the day Mommy had to go to work on Christmas,’ she recalls.

“It’s a day you stand on the front row seat of history and you can’t believe your eyes.”

Aside from those defining world moments, Compton says what she’s treasured most are the personal memories she made with presidents and their families. She’s flown on diplomatic missions with first ladies and seen up close how presidents have handled events both big and small.

Recently, Compton and her husband were in Texas at the invitation of the first President Bush for a program at his presidential library. They were greeted by the former president and first lady in their apartment, reminisced over wine and hors d’oeuvres, and marveled together at the November Supermoon, which they viewed from the Bush balcony.

Compton snaps a pre-retirement selfie before boarding Air Force One for the last time. She was the only broadcast journalist aboard Air Force One with former President George W. Bush on September 11, 2001.



“You remember they’re human. They are people. They’re doing their best with really, really, really hard jobs. Every president I have covered has been an honorable man who has gotten into this because he was doing everything he could to make the United States of America a better place,” she emphasizes.

## Looking forward

When Compton is in Indianapolis, she will do some analysis of the 2016 election, along with what she calls the new “power centers” of politics.

“In the winter, we will be able to look closer to 20/20 vision in the rearview mirror of what happened to bring to the end two political dynasties – the Clintons and the Bushes. We’ll be able to better assess why a woman lost. I don’t think she lost because she was a woman. I think it was because she has political baggage (and has for all her 24 years in the national spotlight),” Compton guesses.

The power centers include something she calls the “Pence-Ryan” partnership.

“Between Michael Pence and Paul Ryan, we have two Republican leaders, both who have now run national campaigns. One who is the Speaker of the House; he is a heartbeat away behind Pence, and Pence is one heartbeat away from the presidency. And how will they use their close friendship and proximity to help? Where are the new power centers, starting with the Pence-Ryan power center?”

When she’s not traveling the country speaking and staying on top of politics from “the outside looking in,” Compton spends her time with her three (soon to be four) granddaughters. She hopes for a more idyllic political landscape for them.

“I spend every waking minute with them that I can,” she says. “I want them to grow up in a world where politics is not hostile, and government operates because people believe in the value of a democracy that works, and not the kind of confrontation and political divide that has prevented things from being done.”

**RESOURCE:** Secure tickets to the March 14 Indiana Chamber Legislative Dinner at [www.indianachamber.com/special\\_events](http://www.indianachamber.com/special_events)